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THE RIVER-NAMES OF BRITISH GUIANA.

BY

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The want of proper vocabularies of the different Indian languages renders the study of our river-names very difficult. Nevertheless, the subject is so interesting, and the object to be gained so very desirable, that even a poor attempt to identify them will probably be better than none at all. If perfected the list would be useful in two ways: first, as indicating the habitats of different tribes; and second, for the light the names throw upon the ideas of these primitive peoples. If, for example, a creek-name is evidently Acawoio or Arawak, we naturally consider that habitations of one of these tribes were once located on its banks. In some cases there is more than one name for a river; in one place this may be Carib or Arawak, and in another Acawoio or Macusi; the majority, however, is Arawak.

Before dealing with the river-names we must say something of that of the country. Guiana has been well known from early time, and the name is found on the first charts. The earliest Spanish manuscripts of the middle of the sixteenth century mention the province of Quayena, and, in describing the Aruacas (Arawaks), say that their country is flat and level with the sea, being nearly all inundated in the rainy season. This accurately describes the coast, and also suggests that any descriptive name probably contains some reference to such a striking character. As we shall see presently, the word means "water," and may be compared to Avon and other river-names in the Old World.

However, we will not dismiss the name Guiana without mentioning other suggestions as to its meaning. Raleigh and the "El Dorado" seekers generally evidently confounded it with the Huayna of the Inca of Peru (Huayna Capac), and the story went that the heir to the throne of Peru escaped with great treasures to found the city of Manoa del Dorado. This suggestion is hardly worth considering, for the mistake is obvious. An Arawak Indian tells me that the name is derived from a tribe of Akayuanas, who, in some far-off time, occupied the country between the Orinoco and the Amazon long before the white man appeared. This tribe is supposed to have been a highly-intelligent and industrious people, and to the Acayuanas are attributed the rock-pictures known under

the name of "Timehri." This name is given to the Akayuana Falls on the Essequibo. I do not give credit to this derivation, for it is most probably *akuya*, a kind of fish, and *wina*, water.

Coming now to the Indian words for water, which in the majority of cases terminate our river-names, we have, first, the Arawak *uni*, with its variants *eeni* and *wini*. *Uniabo*, variously spelt *ooniabo* and *wuniabuh*, means, primarily, rain; either the *uni* or the *abo* may terminate a river-name, *e. g.*, Masar-uni and Cuy-uni or It-abo and Arissar-abo. In its simplest form *uni* is found in the River *Wini* or *Wina*, spelt on Spanish charts Guayni or Guania. It is hardly necessary to go beyond this for the identification of the name Guiana, but it may be stated that a softening of the G will assist; no doubt the original word was pronounced *wiana*. To confirm this we have the fact that the province of Caribana, inhabited by the Guianians, extended from the Orinoco to the Essequibo, of which district the River Wina is the centre. Migrating along the shores of the Caribbean Sea, the first arrivals, no doubt, noticed the change from the rocky shores of Venezuela, and called the inundated delta of the Orinoco and the coast-lands to the southeast by a name descriptive of its character.

The largest river, after the Orinoco, is the Essequibo. This name has been much corrupted. On the earliest Spanish charts it is called Rio Dolce, and Captain Keymis called it Devoritia, after the Earl of Essex (Devereux). Some charts give it as Rio d'Esseke, which at first suggests that Essequibo is, like Devoritia, in honour of Essex. However, the name is older than Raleigh's captain, for we find Desquixo in Spanish documents long before his time. The Bovianders (those who live on its banks, *above yonder*) call it Scapi, which they say means a three-legged pot; but as such utensils were utterly unknown in early times, we cannot accept this derivation beyond a suggestion. It is just possible that the junction of the three rivers Essequibo, Cuyuni, and Masaruni may have given a fanciful idea of a tripod or three legs; but we have a much better explanation than that. The real derivation of the word is from *dassiqua*, my house, and *seba*, a stone; hence the older name Dissekebe. *Issequahu* is given as the root-word for house, but Arawaks never use substantives without the possessive pronoun. The explanation of the word house-stone is very simple. The Indian pot is an earthen vessel, very fragile, and it must be supported on three fire-stones in the absence of legs. My Arawak acquaintance tells me that the name originated as follows:

A long time ago, when the Spaniards first overran the country, the white men

hunted our people with dogs, and, when caught, the elders were cruelly tortured to extract information of hidden treasure, and infants dragged from their mothers' arms and thrown to the dogs. Hence our people had to flee for their lives from one river to another, often to places where no stones for supporting the pots could be had, and where, therefore, it was of great importance that they should carry fire-stones in their canoes. The usual number in a canoe was nine, with which, by proper arrangement, four pots or *dwaadas* could be supported. It happened that a fleet of canoes, filled with Arawaks, once, in seeking protection at the Dutch Fort Kyk-over-al, encountered a heavy squall somewhere near the mouth of the river, the result being that most of the canoes were upset. The Arawaks swam ashore; they recovered their canoes, but not their fire-stones; hence they named the river *Dissekeebo*, or river of (my) fire-stones.

This story is not quite right, for the river was named before the Dutch fort came into existence; nevertheless the meaning of the name is fairly settled. In its upper reaches it is called *Sipu*, which means rock or stone. I have been told that this means also a place for washing; but, as the little washing is done by pounding on stones, there is nothing incongruous in either derivation. The Essequibo also goes by the name of *Araunama*, from a kind of fish found in its upper waters.

Another word found commonly as a prefix or termination of river-names is *bara* or *para*, properly the sea, but applied to rivers and creeks as well. There is a Para Creek in Dutch Guiana, and the Brazilian Pará, interpreted as "the mother of waters," is the same word. Lake Parima of the El Dorado seekers and the River Barima, no doubt, are synonymous. The Orinoco is named on old charts Rio de Paria, Yuyapari, or Huriparia. In combination it is found in many names of creeks in the Demerara River, *e. g.*, *Una-baru* (Bird's Creek), *Yacuri-baru* (Alligator's Creek), *Seba-paru* (Silk-cotton-tree Creek), and *Sakwa-paru* (Macaw's Creek). *Wini-peru*, in the Essequibo, is probably *uni-para*.

However, we must not be too hasty in our conclusions, for *bara* is the name of the little dogfish, a species of *Cychla*. This is possibly the root of *beri* in the name of the River Berbice (formerly Beribeece or Berbeeshees). *Beece* is place or haunt, and therefore the Berbice would be a good fishing-place for the Bara fish. A creek in the Essequibo named Baribara is possibly the name of the fish with that of water or creek.

Beecé, *biscé*, or *bisé* as a termination is fairly common. My Arawak acquaintance says it means offshoot or branch, but hunting-ground or place for fishing seems more to the point. He gives the following tradition of the origin of the name *Itooribisce* (Howling-monkey's Creek), in the estuary of the Essequibo:

During the tribal war between Arawaks and Caribs the latter cut off their enemy

from all access to the Arawak hunting grounds of the northwest. However, nothing daunted, the Arawaks sent a party to the Essequibo with a view to obtain a supply of barbecued meat. Coming into that river, they were disappointed to find it destitute of all game except baboons (red howling monkeys); but, doing their best, they dried a supply of these and embarked on their return voyage. Off the Itooribisce Creek they were beset by chopping seas, too rough for their frail canoes; they were upset, and the provision supply lost. Hence the name Baboon's Place or Creek.

Near this creek is the *Aroabisce*, or jaguar's haunt, near an island of the same name. Curiously enough, this has been corrupted in such a way that the shore near by is known as the Arabian Coast, notwithstanding which the island is rightly named Tiger (local name for jaguar) Island. Corruption has made sad blunders with many of our names, and it is only by studying old charts that we are able to get at something like the original Indian name. Even then the difficulties are not ended, for words nearly alike are often indistinguishable when compounded. As examples of this I will mention that *Ara* is the blue macaw, *Aroa* the jaguar, and *Arara* the alligator.

Another termination in the names of creeks is *kiaboora*, *cabra*, or *capura*, meaning plenty or abundance. It is used as an Arawak synonym for the Acawoio *baro*. Where creeks are known under two names we have the Alligator Creek, called *Kaicuchi-kaboora* by the former and *Yacuri-baro* by the latter. In the upper Berbice and Demerara, formerly inhabited by Acawoio, *kaboora* is often found as a termination in creek names, but near the coast not a single example can be found.

Demerara has been so much corrupted that it is hard to identify. The earliest form of the name is Dumaruni, and some Spanish charts give it as Rio de Mirara. The most probable identification is from the old name Temmerary or Dimmerary, the Timeneere or letter-wood, well known as one of the exports from Guiana in early times. Another early name was Immenary, said to be the name of *Curatella americana*, the leaf of which is used in place of sand-paper for polishing bows and clubs.

The Corentyne was originally the Curetini or Hawk River; the Abary, Wapari, probably from the Wallaba (Wapa), *Eperua falcata* being plentiful there. Pomeroun was formerly Bouroma, possibly a variant of Barima, perhaps from *bereme*, the ant-bear. Cuyuni is named from a bird (*Penelope*), Masaruni from a timber tree (*Aspidosperma excelsum*), and Maruca, or Moroco, from Morequie, the *jabiru* or giant stork.

I have prepared a list of about three hundred names, some of

which I have been unable to identify; but enough has been learnt to get a general idea of the meanings. Assistance has been obtained from persons who have lived among the Indians, but in many cases it is as difficult to get information from the aborigines as it would be to obtain the meaning of local names from an English labourer. They use the same words as their fathers, but do not trouble to find out their meanings. In some cases the original inhabitants have died out; even tribes are entirely lost, with not even a parrot to give us an idea of their language. In some cases the name was intended to commemorate some past event the story of which is lost. Superstitious fancies, no doubt, as in Creole names like Devils' and Jumbi Creeks, are responsible for some names. The Wieronie, a large affluent of the Berbice, is the Siren's Creek—the place where the mysterious water-mamma dwells. This mischievous creature is supposed to upset canoes and drag their occupants down to some habitation beneath the dark waters. It is interesting to note that the prickly palm, *Desmoncus*, which hangs out its terminal hooks in such a way as to be dangerous to boatmen, has a name, *Weeri*, which suggests the water-sprite. Species of *Podostomaceæ*, that grow on rocks about the rapids, are called *Weyra*, and a swimmer may easily be entangled in their slimy meshes.

In most cases, however, the names are obviously given from some striking character which impressed the first inhabitants. It was a good place for hunting some animal; a certain kind of fish was abundant in the water, or game birds plentiful in the trees. The creek where macaws resorted became Macaw's Creek; that where a big snake was found, Camondi Creek; and if good timber, medicines, or fish poison were to be had the name commemorated the fact.

Hardly a game beast, bird, or fish can be mentioned the name of which is not represented. *Cama*, the tapir, was, no doubt, found in the Camouni; the *Aboayah*, or peccary, in the Abooydary; *Cabywa*, the water-haas, in the Cabeparu, and *Saree*, the deer, in the Sarobaru. Roppong ducks are common in the Rupununi, Hannaqua in the Yanekuru, Macaws in Araha, and Trumpeter birds in Waracaba. The Indian caught Acara fish in the Acarabise, Yacotta in the Yacatta, Electric eels in the Arinda, and Arowana in the creek of that name. He found the Purple-heart (*Copaifera*) to make his wood-skin in the Culiburicaboora, his silk-cotton in the Sebuy, his bow-wood in the Masaruni, and his wood for a club in the Itiki-booroo. When he went to the Kanaima Creek he found it wild and hard to penetrate, so he called it lead; in the Ganguk and the

Weri-weri he was troubled with flies; in the Akuina he found a large Camondi snake. The Seba Creek was rocky, gold was found in the Caracuru, and the waters of the Hoonilian were wonderfully cold. Fruit and nuts were found in some; the Hog-plum in the Hooboo, Saouari nuts in the Sawiare, and Pineapples in the Kayo-eroyaro. In the Buraburaro-cabra he heard the peculiar voice of the frog of that name, and he got his arrow poison from the Yuruari.

From these examples it may be seen that these creek-names have meanings which show that the Indian is by no means foolish. A striking point is that rarely, if ever, is a creek named after a person. Now and again there may be a suggestion of some chief's name, but this is so doubtful that we have to dismiss it as untenable. An Indian village may be known to white men as John's or Peter's, but to the people themselves, if there is any name at all, it is one founded on some natural object in the neighbourhood. The Indian has a tendency to speak of his house (my house) or cassava field, and probably many names of creeks have been placed on charts from misunderstandings. Possibly the traveller asked what place it was, or what was the name of a creek, and the answer *Dassiqua* (my house) became the creek-name. Possibly, also, mere statements that a cassava field was situated on its bank, or that maize or tobacco was grown there, gave rise to a class of names which, although not so large as those we have been dealing with, nevertheless are fairly common.

Not only is the house itself brought into the name but almost everything in and around it. The forest home of the Indians is a thatched shed, open on every side, generally known under the name of *benab* or *benabo*. Near the dwellings or within an easy distance is the provision ground or cassava field, *Abunnun-kali*. The word *Abanna* means a leaf, and is applied to cultivated plants generally; and probably in composition, as in *benabo*, refers to the palm thatch. Creeks named Abanakire, Ibanacoa, Banacaboory, and Banim probably were so called from their having once had important settlements on their banks. Of quite as much importance as the shelter is the fire; we have already spoken of the fire-stones. No doubt, when fire could only be procured by a drilling process with two sticks, the hearth was carefully guarded and the embers never allowed to be extinguished. It is even possible that the *benab* was as much to protect the fire from drenching rain as to shelter its human occupants. As might be, therefore, expected, the word for fire, *Ahpo*, occurs in several creek-names, e. g., Aping,

Apoacka, and Apipano. Appapara means food or victuals, probably cooked; there is a creek of that name and another called Apparoo. Of the foods prepared by the Indians cassava is of the utmost importance, and we therefore find creeks named Carasawa, Kashwaicuru, Crushiweyu, and Cassairiba—the last probably meaning Cassareep, the evaporated juice used for “pepper pot.” Cassava bread is *Kallicaro*, from which we get the Calicaboura Creek. Next to cassava we get maize, *Annay*, in the creeks Anapari, Anabaro, Anahita, and Hannawohe.

As might be expected, few foreign names have been used, except by creoles, who speak of Calabash Creek where the Indian says Maraka. Possibly one of the most curious phonetic names for a foreign bird is that of the domestic fowl, from which a creek is named Canirecooroo. Cocks and hens are common about the Indian settlements; they are sold to strangers, but hardly ever eaten by their owners.

The principal furnishing of a benab is the hammock; the name of the Amacura River is probably derived from this useful article. Baskets, *Catauri*, are commonly used for various purposes; hence Kateronero Creek. I can only find one creek, the Canoacaboory, in which the name of the canoe occurs; probably every creek was navigated, and therefore the name would hardly be distinctive. We find the bow (*Wababo*) and arrow (*Shimara*) in the Hobabo and Shimkuna, and the club (*Tiki*) in Ithakka. Itikibooroo is the wood from which clubs are made; it gives the name to two creeks.

In conclusion, I may remark that these names prove the Indian to be entirely practical. There appear to be no abstract ideas beyond the water-sprite superstition, and one other that refers to a mysterious arrow that pierces unseen and causes sickness. Black and white, or rather dark and clear, waters give names to some creeks, but, generally speaking, adjectives are rare. As may be seen from the examples, Indian words are not difficult to pronounce, and we may presume that these river-names will last.